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The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline

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In the book's introduction, Tishler provides a marvelously concise yet thorough biographical overview of Jens Jensen. Readers who are new to Jensen would be well advised to linger over these value-added pages before jumping into his tantalizing collection of writings.

The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline, by Elesha Coffman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. x, 213 pp. Illustration, notes, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Bill Douglas lives and works in Des Moines. Much of his reading, research, and writing focuses on Iowa's religious history.

A July 23, 2013, *New York Times* article surprisingly waded into the world of religious historiography, reporting its new emphasis on the twentieth-century U.S. Protestant mainline. Among the books the article cited was this book about the *Christian Century*, by Elesha Coffman, who teaches at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.

Probably the preeminent liberal Protestant journal of the past century—only *Christianity and Crisis* would challenge it—*The Christian Century* postulated, and expected to attain, an ecumenical, progressive and irenic vision of Christianity that, Coffman argues, depended on cultural capital—mass acceptance of its viewpoints was seldom forthcoming. Adept at using historians beyond the usual religious subset, Coffman invokes David Plotke's argument that the New Deal was created, and continued by conscious effort, to answer the question, "How did the mainline become the mainline?"

The Christian Century had its nineteenth-century roots in Iowa as a Disciples of Christ publication, *The Christian Oracle*. As Coffman astutely points out, Disciples lacked the organizational apparatus of most Protestant denominations and depended on print for coherence (that, and public debates). Charles Clayton Morrison, chiefly responsible for the journal's dominance, also had roots in Disciples Iowa. He preached his first sermon as a teenager in Red Oak, attended Drake University and its divinity school, and fell under the spell of H. O. Breeden, pastor of Central Christian Church of Des Moines. In 1894 Breeden's lecture program brought the Hindu leader Vivekananda to Des Moines; for unearthing such details, Iowa historians owe Coffman gratitude.

The Christian Oracle became *The Christian Century* at the turn of the century and with its move to Chicago; Morrison became editor in 1908. He slowly realized that the magazine's survival required delinking from the Disciples. By 1920 he had charted a wider course championing liberal Protestant causes, especially prohibition, pacifism, and church unity. (It is easy to forget that prohibitionism was a Progressive

mainstay and, with rare exceptions, such as Wallace Short of Sioux City, a required trait among Protestant ministers.) Morrison's legalistic brand of pacifism championed William Borah and the Kellogg-Briand Treaty; in retrospect, banning war seems not to have taken hold. Coffman offers fascinating details about Morrison's courtship of Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Morrison recognized as an intellectual prodigy, for a full-time position at the *Century*; Niebuhr was dissuaded by Kirby Page (another Drake Divinity School graduate), whose socialist mass-based pacifism resonated more with Niebuhr at the time.

Niebuhr, still a contributing editor, dominates the 1930s narrative; surprisingly for writers for a liberal publication, neither Morrison nor Niebuhr supported FDR in 1932. Morrison's continuing prohibitionism led him to opt for Hoover; Niebuhr, with his lingering socialism, supported Norman Thomas. In perhaps the most famous exchange in *Christian Century* history, Reinhold's brother H. Richard extolled the virtue of nonintervention, while Reinhold advocated activism; Coffman parses the theological differences well. A harsh review of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and differing evaluations of the crisis in Europe eventually led to Reinhold's bitter break with the *Century* and his founding of *Christianity and Crisis*.

I was persuaded by Coffman's argument that the *Century* represented mainline Protestantism, but needed more explanation about why Morrison's often eccentric positions did not jeopardize that position. After his retirement, for an anniversary edition, Morrison went on an anti-John Dewey rant, and his editorial opposing Kennedy's candidacy was rejected (the *Century's* new conservative rival, *Christianity Today*, printed it).

In her chapter on postwar ecumenism, Coffman makes a rare misstep, citing as evidence an advertisement for a book that seems to have had little influence; publications routinely accept advertising that may not reflect editorial policy. Otherwise, this good book deserves a better index: H. O. Breder, Vivekananda, and Glenn Clark are omitted, and one suspects a less Iowa-centric check would reveal more. For Iowa readers, it is worth noting that the *Century's* popular series, "Twelve Great Churches," in 1951 included two Iowa congregations: Ames's Collegiate Methodist Church and Decorah's Washington Prairie Lutheran Church.

In Susan Glaspell's short story "'Finality' in Freeport," radicals push for the public library to obtain a book on higher criticism, leading to a storm of controversy. When the campaign is finally successful, the book sits on the shelves unread, but finally a prominent opponent of the book is caught checking it out. He protests that he must read it

as it is on his Sunday School's reading list. Without citing Glaspell, Coffman argues for a similar influence for *The Christian Century*: often the far-out becomes the new norm.

The Life of Herbert Hoover: Fighting Quaker, 1928–1933, by Glen Jeansonne. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xxi, 539 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Cal Coquillette is assistant professor of history emeritus at the University of Dubuque. He is the author of two articles in the *Annals of Iowa* (1999 and 2000) on President Herbert Hoover's economic policies.

Glen Jeansonne's account of the Herbert Hoover presidency, 1928–1933, challenges history's view of Hoover as one of the nation's worst presidents. Historians generally agree that Hoover and his administration were mostly ineffectual in combating the first years of the Great Depression. Following the stock market crash of 1929, Hoover became a victim of economic circumstance and a subject of ridicule. In part, that was attributable to a reticent, indeed dour, personality, a disdain for politics, and a desire to work behind the scenes through committees, commissions, and conferences. It is little wonder, then, that he is often perceived as a do-nothing president. Jeansonne, following exhaustive research in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa, concludes that "Hoover was a great man and, more importantly, a good man, but his presidency was only a partial success" (466).

By the time Hoover became president, he enjoyed an international reputation. He was born in West Branch, Iowa, orphaned at age 9, and 20 years later had accumulated a fortune as a mining engineer abroad. He had served as Food Relief Administrator following World War I and as Secretary of Commerce under Presidents Harding and Coolidge during the 1920s. He became nationally prominent as the federal government's point man dealing with the great Mississippi River flood of 1927. Although he never held an elective office until November 1928, Herbert Hoover was a household name with an enviable record of accomplishment. If ever there was a chief executive poised to deal with an economic crisis, or any crisis for that matter, Hoover seemed to be the right man for the time.

The Great Depression, however, called for both exceptional political skills and imagination, both of which Hoover lacked. While farm and tariff legislation consumed excessive amounts of his time, as Jeansonne notes, perhaps that was indicative of his propensity to study the trees and miss the forest of the deteriorating economy. Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve, today's economic stabilizer, was then timid and